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Faithful pray as the Blessed Sacrament is carried among the pews during a Lent revival faith service at Notre Dame d'Haiti Catholic church, March 29, 2025, in Miami. (AP/Giovanna Dell'Orto)

Giovanna Dell'orto

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Miami — April 1, 2025

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Packed pews, rollicking singing and emotional devotions have marked Lent worship services at Notre Dame d'Haiti, the Catholic church at the heart of the largest Haitian diaspora in the United States. For a community caught in the crossfire of [growing violence in their island homeland](#) and [disappearing humanitarian protections in the U.S.](#), clinging to faith in God is one of the few lifelines left.

"We believe in him. We pray for possibilities," said Kettelene Fevrier. She fled Haiti two years ago under a temporary humanitarian program created by the Biden administration and canceled by Trump's, effective later in April.

At the weekend Mass closing a Lent revival program, Fevrier sang with the choir that kept more than a thousand congregants dancing in the aisles well past midnight. Singing is praying, she said, and she has two main intentions.

"First, that I stay here," she said. "Second, that God will lead me on the right path."

Among those swaying to the Creole hymns was Sandina Jean, an asylum-seeker who fled Haiti in 2023. In her increasingly gang-controlled homeland, such a celebration would be hard to safely hold, she said.

"Haiti is getting worse. We don't have a home to go back to," Jean said. "When you pray, when you come to Mass, it helps you to keep moving."

### **The spiritual home of the Haitian diaspora**

Notre Dame d'Haiti was founded nearly 50 years ago as a mission of the Catholic Church in Little Haiti, a neighborhood near downtown Miami that grew as people fled waves of turmoil. About half a million Haitians live in Florida, making greater Miami by far their largest home away from home.

"Notre Dame d'Haiti is the point of rallying of this community," said the Fr. Reginald Jean-Mary, who has led the parish since 2004. "We accompany Haitian migrants to integrate in U.S. life."

Today, their greatest need is a sense of peace.

"People are very desperate, broken, hopeless and at the same time, they continue to believe," Jean-Mary said.

The gangs that control the vast majority of Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince, have [stepped up the attacks](#) that have killed thousands of people across the country and left more than one million homeless. Sixty thousand were displaced in a single month — a record — according to a late March United Nations report.

So growing numbers of Haitians have fled to the United States. More than 200,000 came under a "humanitarian parole" program created in late 2022 that the Department of Homeland Security said it would revoke in late April.

Earlier this year, the U.S. government also announced that in August [it would end "temporary protected status"](#) for about half a million Haitians. Their status had been renewed by the Biden administration, which had widely [expanded that type of humanitarian visa](#).

Some Notre Dame congregants felt that these new arrivals strained available resources — and voted for President Donald Trump, whose [immigration policies have found support](#) among many in Miami's long-established Latino communities, too.

But most congregants are still stepping up to help their compatriots who often sold what little they had in Haiti to take advantage of legal protections in the United States, Jean Souffrant said. He leads the Pierre Toussaint Leadership and Learning Center, Notre Dame's social services hub, which offers free day care, job training, and language and tech classes.

Last week, one immigration [session — held by Catholic Legal Services](#) on church grounds — lasted until 1 a.m. because so many people lined up, desperate for advice, Souffrant said.

"It's never been this bad" for Haitians in the U.S. and on the island, he said. "What a heavy burden, being told you're no longer allowed in a country that welcomed you."

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Octavius Aime said the new arrivals' difficulties affect the entire community, which he's seen grow over 40 years at Notre Dame. Many are terrified to lose their work permits, which came with humanitarian protections, since their U.S. salaries are lifelines for families in Haiti.

"We're hurting," Aime said. "We are so worried, we don't know what to do."

### **Lifting the Haitian diaspora in prayer**

The uncertainty makes it especially important to gather and uplift all Haitians at events like the revival, at which Aime volunteered. It centered on the biblical story of the Jewish people's miraculous escape from slavery in Egypt after Moses parted the Red Sea.

The event's motto was that nobody can close a door opened by God — or "Bondye" in Creole, which is derived from the French for "good God."

"We all need it at this moment," Savio Magloire said of the biblical message as he and his fiancée watched Mass projected on a screen outside the packed church. A few folding chairs were set up under the palms.

In normal times, the grounds would be full with the overflow crowd, but now many are [too afraid because of their immigration status](#) to be seen in public, said Sandra Monestime, who was sitting near Magloire.

She's been coming to Notre Dame for more than 40 years, since she was a teen, and trusts that the intergenerational congregation with more than three dozen ministry groups will survive this latest period of turmoil because it's "like family."

Dressed in bright white with soft pink flourishes, a youth group called "mimers" — a Haitian tradition, they mime some of the liturgy through dance — led the Mass entrance procession. The children are both U.S.-born and new arrivals, coordinator Asencia Selmon said.

"That's what the church brings," Selmon said, of youth participation. "We help them to be involved in church, not only spiritually but socially. When the priests preach, they show people not to despair."

That's the message that Helene Auguste, a parishioner for the past 40 years, tries to convey to her brother, a teacher in Haiti. Every time the phone rings, she fears it's with news he was killed in the escalating violence.

"There's no life for the people of Haiti," Auguste said, adding only the power of prayer remains. "Now you can't talk to any people, you speak to God."

## **A faith that energizes, amid crushing crises**

And speak — and sing, and dance — to God is just what the congregants of Notre Dame do.

At the closing revival event, the faithful had lined up before 5 p.m. to enter the church — to get splashed, one by one, with holy water by a visiting Haitian priest. [Eucharistic adoration](#) followed, then a more than four-hour-long Mass and a reenactment of the ancient Israelites crossing the Red Sea to the promised land.

That's when music surged, and the faithful jumped to their feet, singing, as the celebrating priests pumped fists, clapped and swung to the rhythm.

Even the ushers, demurely dressed in white shirts, started rocking to the beat.

"If you want a stronger faith, an energizer, you come here," Suzie Aristide, an usher, said. "Then you get out and you're ready — your soul, your body, your mind. That's what we are: our faith."